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The Value of an On-Site Residency Experience for Online MBA Programs

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ABSTRACT

The number of institutions of higher education offering MBA programs entirely online has expanded dramatically. While such educational options offer advantages for students who cannot easily attend in-class courses, online programs do present a number of challenges for MBA programs including concerns related to assessment, institutional engagement and adequately addressing important business issues such as innovation. To address the challenges presented when delivering programs through distance education methods, many business programs require online students attend one or more on-site "residency" sessions. This paper focuses on one approach to conducting a residency.

Keywords: Online MBA, MBA Assessment, Residency Requirement, Student Engagement, Teaching Innovation

INTRODUCTION

It is often stated that a key challenge facing distance education programming, especially those delivered asynchronously online, is the ability to assess student outcomes (Shelton and Pedersen, 2015; Kearns, 2012; Palloff and Pratt, 2009). This is particularly an issue with business programs where important elements of assessment, such as assessing student's ability to interact and work within a team environment, evaluation of oral presentation development and delivery (Kenkel, 2011), and measuring critical thinking skills, are challenging to measure.

Also, accrediting bodies that have been most impacted by online education have responded with adjustments to their standards that address these changes. For instance, within the business discipline, a leading accrediting body, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB), has recently issued new standards with acknowledgement given to the evolution that is taking place in program delivery. One key requirement articulated in the revised standards is that programs ensure students' efforts in a program "are equivalent in terms of depth and rigor" across all delivery modes (AACSB, 2015 p. 34). This has led many programs to develop new methods for assessing online learners (Ewell et al., 2011).

In addition to issues related to student assessment, accrediting bodies have also shown concern regarding student engagement (AACSB, 2015 p. 2), which may be especially challenging for online programming. As non-traditional students, who may never visit the campus, online learners may exhibit traits similar to commuter students, who tend to be less engaged with an institution (Newbold et al., 2011). The lack of student engagement may have implications in terms of enhancing a program's reputation and establishing networking contacts. Additionally, the intended target of institutional contributions by alumni, who completed their studies online, may differ compared to traditional students especially in terms of directing their giving for on-campus spending (Hurst, 2008).

Finally, accrediting bodies have expressed the need for graduate business programs to focus on issues related to innovation (AACSB, 2013), which an IBM study found is the number-one "leadership competency" of the future (Dyer, Gregerson & Christensen, 2011). While online coursework can be delivered in a way that will address some level of innovation, evaluation of the methods and processes by which students demonstrate a productive response to the concepts is often limited to those presented through written reports. Additionally, effective measures of students' innovative knowledge may not be as broad as it would be if innovative behavior is evaluated within a group environment.

To address the challenges presented when delivering programs through distance education methods, many business programs presented online require students attend on-site sessions. Typically, these sessions are held at the home campus or designated meeting facility (e.g., hotel). While many "residency" requirements are often short in duration (e.g., one weekend), objectives set for these sessions may be effective in addressing the challenges presented with distance education.

RESIDENCY PROGRAM OPTIONS

As defined by the United States Department of Education, a distance education program is one in which "all required coursework for program completion is able to be completed via distance education courses" (Distance Education, n.d.). While this definition may suggest students must be able to complete all required program work online, a further definition of the concept of "distance education courses" indicates that programs may institute requirements that require students to attend on-campus or in-person sessions for "orientation, testing, or academic support services" (Distance Education Course, n.d.). Additionally, such definitions for categorizing distance education programs have been accepted by media outlets and ranking services that evaluate online MBA programs (Brooks & Morse, 2015).

In light of the definitions established by the U.S. Department of Education, many MBA programs, classified as delivering program entirely online, require students attend non-credit bearing on-campus or on-site programs. To determine the extent to which some form of residency experience is required, a study was undertaken to evaluate online MBA programs. The study examined all U.S. schools accredited by AACSB that offer 100% online MBA programs. The study involved analyzing information found on the websites of each school offering MBA programs.

During the period of this study, 133 of 458 schools evaluated (29.0%) offer 100% online MBA programs. Of the schools offering online MBA programs 30 (22.6%) required a residency experience. The contents of programs requiring on-site attendance vary widely, though most appear to address three key issues. First, the majority of schools require an on-site orientation, often held over several days, that focuses on providing program and school information. Second, several schools require participation in multiple day experiential programs that may feature student engagement exercises, testing or international travel. Third, a small number of schools require an end-of-program capstone experience.

While the results of this study indicate that a large percentage of online programs do not have residency requirements, instituting such requirements may offer a number of benefits. First, it allows for direct assessment activity to be undertaken. The key areas evaluated may include communication skills, team building, use of business tools and process, and problem solving. Second, a residency experience can foster engagement between fellow students, program alumni, faculty and staff. Third, depending on the goals of a residency, the experience can be tailored to meet one or more key learning goals. For instance, a residency can include certain approaches to learning focused on innovation and thinking creatively.

One useful approach that can be used in a short on-site visit to address issues of assessment, engagement and learning goals, are team-building exercises. As discussed here, one such exercise can be handled within a competitive platform in which students work in teams to achieve a successful goal. The exercise is carried out at mid-size suburban public university, whose business program is accredited by AACSB. All students, whether completing their coursework on-site or online, must attend the two-day residency program.

INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR EXERCISE

The primary purpose of this exercise is to have students work in a team structure using innovative techniques to reach a goal within a compressed timeframe. Team assignment is intended to distribute students based on skills, work experience and other background. Additionally the mix found in student teams also seeks to balance team composition by considering demographic issues (e.g., gender, age, home country, etc.), current academic performance and previous academic experience. No information on the exercise is provided ahead of the course and team assignments are not announced until students arrive. Additionally, lead instruction for each exercise is alternated among several professors, who bring different skills and requirements to the exercise. In this way, key components of the exercise are adjusted from previous offerings so as to prevent students from preparing in advance.

As an example of one innovative exercise, teams must generate multiple product ideas, converge these ideas into a few alternatives, choose one product idea and present this to an audience consisting of MBA program alumni. Before attending the residency, students are sent reading materials and an assignment dealing with the process of innovation and innovative behaviors that they will use in the exercise. The behaviors are based on the five skills of

disruptive innovators (Dyer, Gregersen, & Christensen, 2011), questioning, networking, observing and experimenting, which improve the fifth skill of associational thinking (Anthony 2012). The residency starts with an evening session that includes a discussion of the innovation process. This instructor-led session presents students with the concepts and techniques that can be used to spur innovative behaviors. At the end of the session, teams are given instructions, their assignment and then assigned to individual workrooms where they are to begin their project.

The first step is for teams to generate as many ideas utilizing divergent thinking skills. Team members are asked to only generate questions and avoid trying to produce answers. In addition, team members are encouraged to network with other teams for the purpose of generating more ideas. Instructors consult frequently with the teams to provide support in this process. After about 90 minutes, teams are asked to reflect on the questions they have raised before breaking for the evening.

The next day the teams reconvene to continue their question raising. After one hour, instructors intervene with each team and direct them to begin converging their questions into a few solid product ideas. Teams are then joined by MBA program alumni, who serve in a consultative role as group advisors. Prior to meeting with their groups, the MBA alumni meet with the instructors to discuss their role in working with the teams. The alumni have two tasks: (1) to ask questions intended to get their team to think more about, and possibly alter, their product ideas, and (2) to choose the best idea. Finally, after a few hours with the alumni advisors, teams are given time to prepare for their final presentation.

Teams present their product idea to evaluators consisting of MBA program alumni who did not serve as their business advisors. Teams are given up to 60 minutes to present their plan and to respond to evaluators' questions. The presentation includes presenting their product idea in a play-like manner that is many times humorous and addresses key issues, such as the market potential and possible problems facing the idea. They are also asked to explain the innovative process that led the team to the product idea. Each team member must present and presentation time is expected to be shared equally among all members. To aid course instructors, who must evaluate each group, each presentation is video recorded.

ASSESSMENT

The residency experience serves a useful role in the MBA program's assessment plan. Since a significant percentage of program assessment is embedded in this experience, more control over the assessment process is obtained. Additionally, the in-person aspect of this course helps address potential assessment challenges that may arise with students who are completing the program online (Prineas & Cini, 2011). Finally, the key assessment approach used relies on direct assessment measures, thus meeting a key requirement of AACSB accreditation (AACSB, 2015).

Assessment is spread over multiple measures and involves input from participating faculty, alumni and students. The first measurement occurs after the alumni's consulting session when they offer evaluations of their team as a whole and of individual team members. A second measurement occurs when alumni change roles and become evaluators of group presentations. A third measurement occurs post-residency when students are required to assess fellow team members and provide feedback on their experience. The fourth measurement occurs the week following the residency when instructors meet and assess individual students and the overall teams through a review of recorded presentations. The final evaluation is a post-residency written assignment in which students describe an innovation challenge (either at work or personal) they addressed over a three-week period following the residency.

RESULTS

Analysis of students' feedback shows the residency requirement and the innovation exercise to be an overwhelming positive experience. While students have indicated the innovation exercise is challenging in terms of time pressure, they point to the group interaction and alumni involvement as being highly rewarding. Alumni feedback has also been overwhelmingly positive and, in fact, they often suggest that they would prefer to spend even more time with the student groups.

In terms of assessment value, the innovation exercise has proven to be quite effective. The video capture of student presentations is particularly valuable as these can be shared among multiple faculty including those who did not attend

the residency. Additionally, feedback from participating alumni have resulted in several adjustments to the innovation exercise including to the assessment instruments to better reflex important aspects of measuring innovative behavior and group interaction.

SUMMARY

The residency experience offers advantages in terms of student enjoyment, program assessment and alumni involvement. Given the benefits, MBA programs offered online may wish to consider requiring on-site participation. While there may be challenges, including assessing for a limited time-frame (e.g., one weekend) as well as coordinating student travel and overnight accommodations, adding an on-site requirement may not only excite students while attending the session, it may also have the potential to enhance students' involvement and support following their completion of the program.

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